

February 28th, 2012

Testimony of Eva Lister, Coffeeshop Worker and Mother

In SUPPORT of HB 5291 to raise the minimum wage

Co Chairs and Members of the Labor Committee of the Connecticut General Assembly,

My name is Eva Lister. I am a college-educated single mother of two boys struggling to support my family serving coffee and cashiering in a coffee shop not far from my home. Currently, I work 30 hours per week at \$8.50 an hour, only slightly above minimum wage, also attending school 12 hours per week.

My family, and others like us, would directly benefit from Speaker Donovan's proposal to raise the minimum wage to \$9.75, and I hope to see it become Connecticut law. Connecticut's working families deserve a raise.

My story will help you understand why this issue is important for both families and the economy, and will defy the stereotypes about minimum wage workers. We are generally in the service industry: we clean your bathrooms, prepare your hotel rooms, take care of your children, and serve your coffee with a smile. But despite the hard work we do to keep the economy running, I often feel under-appreciated and devalued. That, however, won't change my work ethic, or the satisfaction I get from doing my job well. I believe hard work is it's own reward, a value I try to instill in my boys.

The demands of my job prove it. It's hard, physical work, and there's not a day that I don't feel my body ache when I return home to my 15-year-old son.

In my own case, I get by now partially because of a small alimony from my ex-husband, in addition to my wages, but the alimony will end in August of this year. I honestly do not know what I will do when that happens. It terrifies me to think about, so I try to stay focused on the here and now. Raising the minimum wage now would help make a huge difference to my family as we weather this tough economy.

Even now I have had to apply for both energy assistance and food stamps. I would never think to use these programs if it were not absolutely essential for my family. I just cannot make ends meet with my current income.

I am a very motivated, hard-working woman. I have an undergraduate degree in a field of social work, and a graduate degree in Education. I have run my own small business in the past, so I know what it is to take on responsibility and hard work.

Most of my past career, until now, was assisting those with acquired brain injuries enjoy a higher quality of living. It was emotionally exhausting work, but I've always been dedicated to my community and to serving others. I took on training, managerial, and program

development roles in that career and always worked my hardest.

My mother fell ill and died in April 2011, and I took a much-needed leave. When I returned after her passing, there had been changes at the company and there was no place for me to return.

Since then, I applied to all sorts of better paying jobs more related to my field. Despite my experience and proven record, no offers came my way. The hard economy wouldn't soften – even for an educated, organized, hard-working person like me.

I know that many others have it worse, and I am hopeful for my future because I am in school. I try to avoid the poverty mentality and teach my children to do the same. We find ways to bond and have fun without being able to afford the things that most families can. Instead of going to movies at the theater or purchasing cable TV, we spend time together outside, play board games, and read short stories to each other before bed. We find ways to get by.

Unless we raise the minimum wage, people who try to support families with jobs like mine will never get ahead. Many people in my position work more than 1 or 2 jobs, and will never be able to go to school and improve their circumstances. If they are always struggling to make ends meet, they will not have the time or presence of mind to be available for their children.

Paying hard working people a low minimum wage hurts everyone, because it puts a greater burden on the already over-stressed social service system, and certainly does not help the economy in the long run.

Raising the minimum wage, on the other hand, would not only provide a more just and dignified standard of living for families like mine, but will also help the economy. Families like mine do not have the money to spend to support the economy. Pay us more, and we'll be able to support local businesses and do our part to fuel the economic recovery. We want to do our part to support local business, but we have nothing more to give.

Hard work needs to be fairly compensated. Our state has a high and rising cost of living. It's unconscionable that workers trying their hardest are forced to live in poverty conditions.

Connecticut deserves a raise, and I urge members of this committee to increase the minimum wage, for the Connecticut General Assembly to approve it, and for Governor Malloy to sign it into law.

Thank you.

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